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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 004625

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SUBJECT: UNAPOLOGETIC PM KOIZUMI VISITS YASUKUNI

Classified By: AMBASSADOR J. THOMAS SCHIEFFER. REASON: 1.4(B)(D)

11. (C) Summary: Ignoring criticism from within Japan and abroad, Prime Minister Koizumi became the first Japanese premier in 21 years to pay respects at Yasukuni Shrine on August 15, the anniversary of the end of World War II. In subsequent remarks to the press, Koizumi took an unrepentant "damned if I do, damned if I don't" attitude, specifically mentioning anticipated criticism from China and South Korea, which was not long in coming. Although 56 Diet members also visited Yasukuni Shrine later in the day, many LDP politicians, the leader of the coalition's partner party, and all opposition parties criticized Koizumi's decision to pay respects at Yasukuni on August 15. End Summary.

12. (U) Dressed formally in morning clothes, Prime Minister Koizumi departed his official residence at 7:30am, August 15, en route to Yasukuni Shrine, the place of enshrinement for Japan's war dead of the last 150 years, including 14 convicted Class-A war criminals from World War II. At the shrine, Koizumi signed the visitor's book as "Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi," thereby becoming the first Japanese premier in 21 years, i.e., since Prime Minister Nakasone, to pay respects at Yasukuni on the anniversary of the end of World War II.

13. (U) Koizumi's official visit to Yasukuni Shrine surprised very few in Japan. He had made a public pledge, when campaigning for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidency in 2001, to visit Yasukuni Shrine on August 15. Since that time, he has paid respects at the shrine once every year, but until today never on August 15.

14. (SBU) In remarks to the press after visiting the shrine, PM Koizumi took an unrepentant "damned if I do, damned if I don't" attitude. He cited three basic criticisms of his visit -- Yasukuni's enshrinement of Class-A war criminals, the Japanese constitution, and opposition from China and South Korea. In response to anticipated opposition from China and the ROK, he fired back his own volley at those countries' refusal to hold bilateral summits, adding that despite their opposition to Japan's UN Security Council bid, he would not refuse to engage in dialogue. Deploying a line of reasoning he has used in the past, Koizumi then said that even if President Bush had told him not to go, he would have visited the shrine anyway, but added that he didn't think the President would say such a "childish" thing in the first place. (Note: In its coverage of Koizumi's press conference, NHK edited out the reference to President Bush.)

15. (U) As expected, criticism from abroad was not long in

coming. Japanese media reported that the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a blistering statement, calling Koizumi's visit an action that undermined bilateral relations and challenged international justice. "The Chinese Government expresses strong protest toward this measure, which hurts the feelings of people in countries that were victims of the Japanese militarists' war of invasion, and damages the political basis for Sino-Japanese relations." Japanese television broadcast the Japanese Ambassador in Seoul being called into the ROK Foreign Ministry, which issued a statement reportedly expressing "deep disappointment and indignation" over Koizumi's Yasukuni visit. In addition, ROK President Roh reportedly used his liberation day speech to lambaste Japan on historical issues and called for Japanese leaders to "settle" the issue of visits to Yasukuni.

¶6. (U) Koizumi took plenty of broadsides at home, as well, including some from members of his own party and despite the fact that 56 Diet Members of the LDP and Democratic Party of Japan visited Yasukuni later in the day. Koizumi's coalition partner, Komeito President Kanzaki, repeatedly characterized the visit as "extremely regrettable," and the leaders of every opposition party offered equally critical statements. However, Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe maintained a neutral stance, observing that Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni represented no more than a "personal" decision on his part.

¶7. (C) Comment: Neither Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine on August 15, nor the storm of protest that it engendered, were surprising. Indeed, the only real surprise would have been if Koizumi had not gone. With the immediate fireworks over, the political stage now turns to the LDP presidential election in September. Between now and

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then, front-runner Shinzo Abe will be grilled about what he intends to do with regard to Yasukuni if, as is almost certain, he becomes Japan's next Prime Minister. Based on his performance today, we expect Abe to keep his powder dry and remain non-committal on whether he will visit Yasukuni as Prime Minister.
SCHIEFFER